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RIVERBANK PARK
N E W A R K • N J
CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

2007 Souvenir Journal

As early as 1905, neighborhood groups pushed the Essex County Parks Commission for a new park in Ironbound, and funds were approved.

One of those advocating for the park was Franklin Murphy, owner of the Murphy Varnish Factory (McWhorter St. in Ironbound). Mr. Murphy was one of the first members of the Essex County Parks Commission, and later became Governor of New Jersey.



Backyards used to develop Riverbank Park. Not dated, but shows Ward home (far back) and Frederick Street prior to any park development.



left: Temporary playground, 1907.

below left: Empty wading pool, 1915.



In 1907, land was purchased and a temporary playground was built. Essex County had to wait over a year for one piece of land, owned by the mysterious Anna Ward, who lived in her mansion and never went out for 35 years.

Frederic Law Olmsted's firm designed the park both to be beautiful and to serve recreational needs. Mr. Olmsted was a famous park designer, who created Central Park in New York City and Branch Brook Park in Newark.

~: HISTORY ~:

Because Riverbank Park was one of the most used in Essex County, it needed to be larger. From 1926 to 1931 the park was doubled in size with the purchase of land from the Balbach Smelting Factory, to its present size of 10.77 acres. The baseball stadium was built in 1930.



above: Newark Smelting. This land was the parcel that helped double the size of the park. Note barges moving on the Morris Canal, now Raymond Boulevard.



left: Riverbank site from Passaic Avenue (now part of Raymond Boulevard) looking down Van Buren Street (buildings are on Market Street).

Riverbank Park 1929.



Formal opening ceremony. View from roof of apartment house westerly side of Van Buren St. 1931.



~ HISTORY ~



Through the years, each wave of immigrant populations that arrived in Ironbound used Riverbank Park for dancing, musical performances, sports, playground, relaxation and even civics classes.

Community dance in July 1956. The whole neighborhood does the Bunny Hop.



left and bottom left: Pölka dancers at a July 1956 community dance.



Playground youngsters on playground day, 1959.

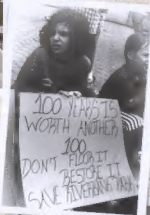
~: COMMUNITY ACTION ~:



In 1996, Ironbound residents learned of a proposal to build a private sportsplex in the park. The community formed SPARK (Save the PARK At Riverbank), which led a successful community effort using many strategies — a legal challenge, a city-wide referendum, alliances with historic preservation and environmental groups — to save the park.



In 1998, the park was added to the National Historic Register.



below: Students from Oliver St. School worked with SPARK to write and perform "Making Sparks Fly," the story of how the community saved the park.



Students pose under the Historic marker.



During the fight, Riverbank had been closed due to the discovery of chemicals there. Now Essex County invested in the park's remediation and restoration. SPARK recruited help from some of the state's top scientists, and worked with the County to design the remediation plan. The surface was capped, and all buildings were restored. An artificial soccer surface was installed. The park finally reopened, with all work completed, in 2003.

"Before" restoration.



Restoration and remediation in progress.



During the years it took for restoration of the park, school and youth groups painted murals to hang on the construction fence to show the community's caring for the park.



above: Daniel Dowd (second from left) and Manuel Lavin, SPARK (far right) explain restoration plans to Charles Beveridge (third from left) from the National Association of Olmsted Parks, during a visit to Newark and the park.



Members of the new SPARK organization with County Executive DiVincenzo cutting the ribbon for the new soccer field.

~: THE 21ST CENTURY ~:

During that same time, members of SPARK formed SPARK Friends, a non-profit dedicated to preserving the park. In 2003, the park reopened permanently and new cultural and educational programs were begun, organized by SPARK Friends of Riverbank Park.

The Cultural Arts Program begins with an annual Music & Art Day in the spring, a special day for student artwork and performances to be displayed in the park, in partnership with local public and parochial schools. Outdoor movies, concerts with all types of music, family fun days, pumpkin festivals, tree trims, puppet shows, art and environmental learning activities, Small World festivals — even a walking and talking Frederic Olmsted (played by a Rutgers University theatre student) — these are some of the experiences that have been enjoyed by thousands of families as part of the Cultural Arts Program over the years.



~ THE 21ST CENTURY ~

A collaboration between Greater Newark Conservancy, Ironbound Community Corporation, the New Jersey Historical Society, and SPARK Friends, the Community Learning Program brings fifth-grade students into the park for a special five-week program in which they learn history, civics, and science by studying Riverbank Park. Since 2004, over 1,000 students have gone through this program. Young people who know the park's history will value Riverbank Park as the precious historic and recreational treasure it is for our community.

SPARK Friends continues to develop creative collaborations. There have been new programs too: gardening for young and old, the Passaic Paddle Boat Race which brought kayaks and canoes down the river, and in 2007, the Riverbank Park mailbox was painted by local artist Gilbert Martinez, and installed in the Van Buren St. Branch of the Newark Public Library. Neighborhood children packed it with birthday cards addressed to the park, celebrating its 100th birthday this year.

